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The Moral Dilemma of China's Modernization: Rethinking Zhang Yimou's *Qiu Ju da guansi*[1]

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"Can there be any justice in today's China?" This is the question raised by Jonathan Spence in his review of *Qiu Ju da guansi* [The story of Qiu Ju], a film by China's best known director, Zhang Yimou. For Spence it is the deepest question that Zhang has considered.[2] However, I will argue in this paper that the criticisms of the film offered by Spence and other critics tend to be narrowed by modern liberal thinking about self and morality and thus are confined to discussing the "political" factors which have shaped morality in developing China. A more intriguing, if not profound, question I will ask about the film is, "Will there be any *good* life in future China?" This question deals primarily with "cultural" aspect of the moral dilemma that plagues China as it modernizes, though this cultural aspect is closely related to the modern political changes in that country. The cultural aspect, I think, is neglected by most critics. Moreover, the paper concludes that the film addresses the potential consequences of the "rule of law" in China: the decreasing of the importance of local community to Chinese morality, the adjustment of the role of the state in society, and the change in the Chinese conception of self, other, and society.

[1] This essay is a revised versin of "Zhongguo xiandaihua de daode kunjing: cong 'Qiu Ju da guansi' tanqi" [The moral dilemma of China's modernization: on "The Story of Qiu Ju"], which appeared in *Dangdai* [Contemporary] (published in Taipei) 92 (December 1993): 92-113. I am grateful to Mr. Mark Jones for his invaluable advice and critical readings of early drafts of this paper. I also thank the anonymous *MCL* reviewer for the helpful comments and suggestions.

[2] See Jonathan Spence, "Unjust Desserts: The Story of Qiu Ju" *(The New York Review of Books*, 24 June 1993: 12).

Individual Rights/Dignity and Modern China's Political Culture

The background of *Qiu Ju da guansi* is post-Deng Xiaoping China, where dramatic economic and social change has resulted from the "reform and opening policy," while rural isolation and political repression continue.[3] The story is simple. Qiu Ju is a pregnant woman in an isolated village in Shanxi Province. Her husband is badly kicked in the balls by the village Chief, Wang, during a quarrel. The Chief would rather give monetary restitution (although reluctantly) than offer an apology. By contrast, Qiu Ju does not want money as compensation; she wants an excuse, apology, or impartial judgment (*shuofa*). In other words, what Qiu Ju struggles for can be regarded as "justice." It is a sense of justice that motivates her to petition various authorities and the local court of law unyieldingly. Justice, or in Qiu Ju's phrase, a *shuofa*, depends in large part on the recognition of, and respect for, the dignity of the individual and the fair treatment of all without regard to social status. For this reason, a village Chief cannot arbitrarily injure ordinary villagers; if he does, he must make an apology or be punished according to the law. As far as the rights of individuals are concerned, a villager is an equal of the Chief, and the protection of this equality is essential to the realization of justice.

It is problematic to attribute Qiu Ju's particular sense of justice and her pursuit of a *shuofa* to an awakening individual consciousness generated by the "reform and opening policy." Nevertheless, her character in the film is very different from typical portrayals of Chinese peasants as submissive and fatalistic, except in the Marxist literature on Chinese "peasant revolts." Moreover, since the story is obviously set in modernizing China during the late Deng Xiaoping era, the observation that Qiu Ju's struggle represents an awareness of individual rights, a fundamental characteristic of modern consciousness, appears well-founded. However, by resorting to the law, does Qiu Ju see justice realized? The answer is not unambiguous. At the end of the film, informed that the Chief is being taken into custody by the police, she is dismayed: "Arrested? All I want is a *shuofa*! I don't want him to be arrested!" In this case, it is easier to impose legal sanctions than to carry out justice. There appears to be a gap between the observance of the law and the realization of justice.

[3] See Lei Da, "Yuanshengtai yu dianxinghua de zhenghe: kan yingpian 'Qiu Ju da guansi' " [A combination of originality and typification: on 'The Story of Qiu Ju'] (*Wenyi Bao* [Beijing], 12 September 1992: 5); Spence, *op.cit.* 12.

The chief problem Qiu Ju confronts under Communist rule is not so much legal as political. Her failure to see justice realized has little to do with the lack or misinterpretation of statutes or the perfunctoriness of officers of the law. Instead, the failure derives mainly from China's political culture. The totalitarian party-state has been quite successful in its attempts to impose rigid social control, even through the recent post-Deng Xiaoping years. Almost all aspects of social life are penetrated by political power. The vehicles for this power are various levels of party organizations, government institutions, production units, and the like. Under this kind of domination, the rights and interests of individuals, as the case of Qiu Ju illustrates, have long been egregiously neglected. In such a political culture, it is not unusual that the dignity of the individual is undervalued and often infringed.

In this film, the thoughtlessness and arrogance of Wang, the local Chief, is precisely characteristic of the political culture created by the party-state. When Qiu Ju asks for a *shuofa*, the Chief replies: "I *did* kick him. So what?" Learning that Qiu Ju has petitioned the police, he says "*I* am the law . . . I am a government official (*gongjiaren*) . . . if they don't back me up, whom will they back up?" One cannot help shuddering at the Chief's overbearing responses, which are typical of the mentality of "state cadres" or government officials (*guojia ganbu*). Such attitudes and behaviors are cultivated by the political culture of the party-state.

As an official of the lowest rank in the socialist bureaucracy, the village Chief is a symbol of the party-state; the kicked balls of Qiu Ju's husband, which are so crucial for reproduction, are a metaphor for the vitality of Chinese society. That is, the focus of the film is on the nearly fatal injury the regime has inflicted upon the body social. As one critic points out, both the family name of Qiu Ju's husband, Wan, which literally means "ten thousand" or "a very great many" in Chinese, and the title of the novel upon which the film is based, *Wanjia susong* [The lawsuit of the Wans], connote the attempts of China's people at remonstrance with the socialist regime.[4]

The enforcement of the law is not automatically followed by the fulfillment of justice. This is the first lesson we learn from *Qiu Ju da guansi*. The prescribed punishment does not teach the Chief to respect the dignity of common villagers, or even persuade him to apologize sincerely. If respect for the value of the individual is integral to the realization of justice, and if justice is an essential ingredient of moral

[4] See Luo La, "Qiu Ju da guansi" [The story of Qiu Ju] (*Yizhoukan* [Hong Kong], 11 September 1992: 103).

life, China's political culture is unjust and immoral because of its neglect of and infringement upon individual dignity.

The breach between the letter of the law and the realization of justice in this case is a moral sensibility, an uncodified spirit of value. As Spence argues, in the story the "true crime was one of callousness against human dignity, and for that no one has any redress."[5] To highlight the failure of the law to bring about justice, the film depicts every law enforcer or official (apart from the Chief) as courteous, kindly, and incorrupt. Although this presentation may not be in harmony with China's reality, it is not, as Spence argues, a "false note."[6] In a society where the values of individual equality and dignity are not widely appreciated in practice (though the values understood in the light of "social equality" and "fairness" are emphasized in the Chinese Communist Party's ideology), even those who, like Qiu Ju, are lucky enough to get the help from many good persons (*haoren*) may not realize justice from the law, let alone those who are not similarly lucky or have no idea of legalities. Unfortunately, this is closer to the reality in China. The presentation of government officials as good persons can be viewed as ironic, which implies that the reverse is truer. Legal codes have clear limitations. The gap between the enforcement of the law and the spirit of justice cannot be spanned without a sense of morality shared by most members of a specific society. And the development of a spirit of justice depends, in turn, heavily on a solidly democratic political culture.

Discussing American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that "Laws are always unsteady when unsupported by mores; mores are the only tough and durable power in a nation."[7] He emphasizes the necessity of propitious cultural moods, sets of values, and patterns of action for the vitality of democratic practices. In terms of Tocquevillian theory, modern China's political culture has contributed little to the development of mores which adequately appreciate the dignity of the individual. The kind of political culture is the chief factor which causes China's troubled morality, illuminated by the role of the village Chief in the film. It is also the focus of Western criticism concerning the encroachments of the party-state on human rights.

[5] See Spence, *op.cit.* 13.

[6] *Ibid.* 13.

[7] See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 274.

The Cultural Aspect of Chinese Morality

The first lesson of the film about the "political" problem of morality is obvious and easily learned, but another is less conspicuous. When the Chief later saves the lives of Qiu Ju and her baby during a difficult labor, the "cultural" dimension of the moral problem in modernizing China is addressed. Because most critics do not appreciate this second lesson, their interpretations of the latter half of the film are unsatisfactory. The tension in the relationship between Qiu Ju and the Chief is significantly reduced by his generous aid during her childbirth, a turn which disappoints many critics. For some, it constitutes a critical flaw in the film. For example, Li Zhuotao concludes that:

> Zhang Yimou is not critical enough of the whole story, and what is expressed is Qiu Ju's failure to distinguish between the principle of law (*fali*) and human feelings (*renqing*). It seems that in the first half of the film the audience follows Qiu Ju to seek justice. In the second half the audience will find that Qiu Ju's position is ambiguous; they, like Qiu Ju, will lose hope for the realization of the principle of law and therefore find themselves caught in ambiguity. This arrangement of the story shows that Zhang Yimou does not have an unequivocally critical attitude toward the whole story; to evade expressing the position is to have a foot in many camps.[8]

Such criticism, I believe, is confined to the logic of the first half of the film, recognizing the "political" factors which cause Qiu Ju's frustrations and treating her pursuit of justice and respect for individual rights as an issue of abstract principle. This narrow approach is characteristic of modern liberal thinking about the self, personal relations, and morality. As Peter Berger says, our age has witnessed "the rise of new moralities and of a new humanism, and most specifically of a historically unprecedented concern for the dignity and the rights of the individual."[9] Dignity and equality are salient concepts in the modern consciousness. They characterize the principle of "natural rights" upon which modern liberalism is based. Because these rights are so commonly and easily infringed, it is essential for liberal theorists

[8] See Luo Ka, ed., "Zhanwang dalu dianying xin dongxiang" [Look at the new tide of Chinese films] (*Mingbao Yuekan*, February 1993) 64-65. On page 65 of this article, Luo presents similar opinions from other critics.

[9] See Peter Berger, "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor" (Michael J. Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and Its Critics* [New York: New York University Press, 1984]) 150.

to provide a principled account of justice and to imbue it with a moral primacy capable of constraining subjective desires and superseding particularistic choices. Justice is sought in universal, impersonal, and objective principles of reason. The rule of law is highly valued as an effective means of delimiting the scope of rights and obligations and of securing the principle of universality, impartiality, and equality. Friedrich Hayek has argued that the "great aim of the struggle for liberty has been equality before the law" and that the extension of the principle of equality to the rules of moral and social conduct is the chief expression of the democratic spirit.[10]

I do not mean to suggest that the disappointed critics of *Qiu Ju da guansi* adopt an explicitly liberal perspective. However, their approach to the story displays a close affinity with liberal ideas. In their view, the character of Qiu Ju typifies an individual awareness of the importance of dignity and equal rights; they tend to interpret the film as a protest against the rule of the CCP. It is natural for them to equate the relief of tensions between Qiu Ju and the Chief with a symbolic withdrawal from political resistance, to regard this outcome as a disappointing compromise.

Such criticisms share with modern liberalism an unsatisfactory view of the self and of moral life. They pay little attention to the social involvement of self and the complications and ambiguities of moral life, which are mainly revealed by Qiu Ju's experience after her difficult labor. First of all, her experience shows that there are different understandings of self and morality in different cultures. The disharmony between two patterns of moral values and judgments is obvious in her thinking about the alleviation of her conflict with the Chief. About fifty years ago, Fei Xiaotong observed a change in Chinese rural society which still applies to Qiu Ju's case:

> China sees the change of her rural society; it is difficult to enforce modern law, because the traditional conception of litigation has been rooted in the mind of the people. The most important reason is that the principle of current law is imported from the West and very different from traditional morality. As I mentioned in the foregoing essays, universal rules applicable to all were not accepted in the traditional Chinese society with a differentially ordered configuration (*chaxu geju*); by contrast, current law adopts the principle of individualistic equalitarianism. Not only is the principle unintelligible to the common people, but legal procedure is so alien to them that they do not know how to apply it. In the countryside the folk are still afraid

[10] See Friedrich Hayek, "Equality, Value, and Merit" (Sandel, *op.cit.*) 80.

of being involved in litigation, but the new institution of law has already been promoted and adopted in the countryside.[11]

When Qiu Ju refers her case to a lawyer to appeal the verdict against the village Chief, she feels very uneasy. She cannot imagine that the lawyer, as a stranger, will take care of the problem for her. In addition, when the court prepares to deal with the case, Qiu Ju just stands outside the court, reluctant to enter. She does not want to confront the city police bureau chief, Yan, in court, because Yan is very kind to her. She thinks that she should not treat such a good person (*haoren*) in this way. Yan has to explain to her that "I am a legal person of the police bureau" (*gonganju de faren*)[12] and that the confrontation in court does no harm to him as an individual. Qiu Ju's uneasiness mainly derives from her moral thinking, which characterizes traditional Chinese morality. This morality is based on a distinct understanding of social configuration, which Fei Xiaotong describes as differentially ordered. Such morality is particularistic: it emphasizes differential moral principles according to specific personal relationships and specific contexts. It is natural that Qiu Ju is unable to understand the modern legal proceedings of Western origin, whose principle is universal equalitarianism.

Qiu Ju's disturbed reaction to the lawsuit is viewed by some critics as her "ignorance" and "backwardness." For instance, Geog Hintzen considers that Zhang's work can be regarded as "a propaganda film" for the government's efforts to establish the "rule of law" and especially for the new Law on Administrative Appeal (LAA) of 1990. Thus he writes:

[11] See Fei Xiaotong, *Xiangtu Zhongguo* [Rural China] (Shanghai: Guancha she, 1947), p. 62. This is my translation. For a different translation, see Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: the Foundations of Chinese Society*, trans. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 105-106.

[12] A correct way to put it should be that the city police bureau is a "legal person" and Yan is its "legal representative." See Wang Jianping, " 'Qiu Ju da guansi' zhong de falü wuqu" [The legal flaws in "The Story of Qiu Ju"], *Wenhuibao* (Shanghai), 21 December 1992, p. 7; 28 December 1992, p. 6. Wang Jianping and Geog Hintzen discuss many legal flaws in this film. According to Wang, the story of Qiu Ju could not happen in reality, because it is apparently contradicts current Chinese law. See Wang, *op.cit.*, p. 6 and p. 7 and Geog Hintzen, "Zhang Yimou's The Story of Qiu Ju: A Propaganda Film for Recent Legislation," *China Information* 7.4 (Spring 1993), pp. 52-53. These legal flaws undoubtedly undermine the significance of the film in exploring China's reality, and Zhang Yimou should be blamed for the mistakes. However, the film still raises a number of questions worth discussing, as this paper argues.

> In a way, the film serves as an illustration of the thesis put forward by the Fourteenth Party Congress that Deng Xiaoping's reforms represent China's second revolution since 1949. The new LAA offers Qiu Ju a way to withstand the oppression of the State at its lowest level. That this leads to a verdict she had not wished for and certainly had not expected, is not simply intended as a demonstration of her ignorance of legal proceedings and their consequences. It points to the great social changes which China, as a mainly rural society, is currently experiencing.[13]

Qiu Ju's ignorance of legal proceedings is particularly unbearable for those critics who see the relief of tensions between Qiu Ju and the Chief as a withdrawal from the pursuit of genuine justice. Qiu Ju's uneasiness is thought to be a reflection of the "poverty of her inner spiritual world."[14] However, I disagree with such criticism. Qiu Ju's discomfort shows that she is caught in a dilemma which derives from the conflict between two patterns of moral thinking. This moral dilemma should not be simply identified with ignorance. For this reason I also disagree with the critique that Zhang Yimou is "immature" and that his reflection upon Chinese tradition is superficial.[15] Zhang's presentation of Qiu Ju as an incarnation of traditional Chinese morality, I think, is quite appropriate.

Qiu Ju's feeling about the lawsuit not only shows that there is a significant difference between Chinese/traditional and Western/modern morality. It also reminds the audience of another deeper "cultural" aspect of the moral problems which stem from the fading of a certain pattern of personal relationships and community life in modernization. It is believed that this pattern contributes greatly to the development of individual moral thinking. In order to show how the film touches this problem, let me briefly turn to the different visions of the relationships between self, society, and morality.

Different views of moral judgment represent different conceptions of the self. The liberal perspective which dominates the modern conception of the individual tends to view the self as a free and independent existence. As Berger points out, modern consciousness perceives this solitary self as the bearer of human dignity and of inalienable human rights. Dignity is based on an "intrinsic humanity

[13] See Hintzen, *Ibid.* 53.

[14] Tuo Lake, " 'Qiu Ju da Quansi' yu 'xinxieshi fengge' " ["The Story of Qiu Ju" and the "neo-realistic style"] *(Dangdai dianying* [Beijing] 3 [1993]) 46.

[15] This is Shi Qi's criticism. See Luo, *op. cit.* 65.

divested of all socially imposed roles or norms."[16] Moreover, it is exactly because human beings are regarded as basically separate and independent selves that a neutral framework is needed. This turns out to be "a framework of rights that refuses to choose among competing purposes and ends." The self is considered to be prior to its ends, and the right to the good.[17]

In contrast, a number of critics of modern liberalism highlight the social involvement of the self. It is held that the self is situated in and defined by social relationships and social context: we cannot perceive ourselves as existing independently, completely detached from our social roles and attachments. Social roles and attachments are thought to be necessary for the integration of the self and the capacity to reflect, which in turn is necessary for the formation of his or her moral judgment. Moreover, the quest for the good with social roles and attachments as a central concern is emphasized. Alasdair MacIntyre, a major critic of modern liberalism, argues:

> The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical enquiry about the character of the good.[18]

Equally important is that, for MacIntyre, these virtues are not manifested so much in the knowledge of a set of generalizations or maxims as in the capacity to know how to choose among the maxims and how to apply them in specific situations.

This criticism of contemporary liberalism enlightens discussions about the "cultural" aspect of the moral problem of China's modernization touched by the film. Though Qiu Ju quests for a *shuofa* from the very beginning of the story, she, as well as others involved in her

[16] See Berger, *op.cit.* 153.

[17] See Michael Sandel, "Introduction," Michael Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and its Critics* (New York: New York University Press, 1984) 5.

[18] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 219.

conflict with the Chief, obviously experience a significant change of moral thinking after the Chief saves the lives of her and her baby. This change reminds us of the complexities of moral life and the ambiguities of moral judgment. It also shows that the criticism of modern liberal vision of self, society, and morality is quite convincing.

When Qiu Ju recovers from the difficult labor, she brings her newborn baby to the Chief's house in person. She expresses her sincere gratitude to the Chief and invites him to the banquet for the baby's first full month. The Chief still appears to harbor feelings of resentment, but he does not rudely reject the invitation. He even takes the baby from Qiu Ju and holds it in his arms. It is difficult to say that the Chief is hypocritical in this situation. He looks sincerely happy when he holds the baby, and I find no reason why he has to pretend to be so. Although the film does not show us that Qiu Ju has already given up the quest for a *shuofa*, it is obvious that the tension between her and the Chief is alleviated after their meeting. On the part of Qiu Ju, because she is grateful to the Chief for saving her life and her baby's, the original quest for a *shuofa* or for justice seems to become less important. As far as Qiu Ju's husband and father-in-law are concerned, they do not want to confront the Chief from the very beginning. It is logical that they think that Qiu Ju should not insist on the quest for a *shuofa* any more because of the Chief's favor. They may hope that their non-conflictual relationship with the Chief could be resumed. From the viewpoint of other villagers, even if the Chief was wrong because he kicked the husband, he has redeemed the sin by good deeds. Qiu Ju and the Chief are expected to become reconciled with each other as soon as possible.

The film shows no indication that the Chief admits any wrongdoing. However, his crucial aid to Qiu Ju offers an opportunity to get rid of the embarrassment which is caused by Qiu Ju's challenge. Qiu Ju's appeal to the law to seek a *shuofa* obviously forms a challenge to the Chief's political authority. Her persistent quest for individual dignity and equality is a threat to the privilege given to the "state cadre" in Chinese political culture. However, the importance of the Chief as a political leader and his duty to take care of villagers is demonstrated in his crucial help to Qiu Ju. His political authority is reconfirmed through this kindness. When he kicked Qiu Ju's husband, he was wrong. But the significance of his political authority should still be appreciated. His help genuinely alleviates the tensions that exist between him and Qiu Ju. It seems possible to repair their almost broken relationship. We learn from the Chief's family, who arrives at the banquet first, that the Chief is dressing himself and will come to

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the banquet very soon. Therefore it is not surprising at all that they should be reconciled. If things go smoothly, we can even imagine the Chief making an apology to Qiu Ju and her family, while Qiu Ju has already changed her mind and no longer cares about the *shuofa*.

The reasons why this development in their relationship can be possible are clear. First, the Chief saves his antagonist; the antagonist shows gratitude to him and even invites him to the banquet. Perhaps the Chief now feels that he, as a leader and as an individual, has been really respected, and making an apology will do no damage to his "face" (*mianzi*) and authority. Moreover, it may serve to show his kindness to a common villager. In a sense, this action will contribute to his stock of "symbolic capital," which may translate into political advantage.[19] That is, the action can be used to demonstrate the moral superiority of the Chief as a community leader, even though he may not be conscious of this effect. Secondly, Qiu Ju's husband and father-in-law have showed a certain degree of respect to the Chief from the very beginning; the Chief really works hard to save Qiu Ju and her baby; Qiu Ju goes to his house in person and invites him to the banquet. These facts suggest that the Chief is able and willing to take care of the villagers, even those who oppose him. The facts also show that the Chief is respected by the villagers for his ability to coordinate the village affairs, although to some extent he is arrogant and always appears to put on airs. In other words, the thoughtlessness and arrogance which the Chief shows when Qiu Ju asks him for a *shuofa* are only one side of his personality. It is not impossible for him to make an apology after his attitude to Qiu Ju softens. This apologetic feeling may not arise from his becoming aware of the importance of a common villager's dignity, but it can be a result of regret at hurting a member of his community. For Qiu Ju's part, she can accept the potential apology because the Chief has become her savior. More important is the fact that what she keeps seeking is exactly this sort of sincere apology. Not only is the punishment imposed by the law for the Chief unexpected for Qiu Ju, as the end of the film shows, it is also something she never wanted.

My interpretation of the psychology of the characters in the film and my inferences about the development of the story emphasize the history of interaction among these characters, their current situation, social relationships, feelings, desires. These factors combine with one another and form the basis on which the characters make their moral

[19] For the concept of symbolic capital, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 171-83.

judgments. They show how complicated moral life can be. The intensity of the sense of everyday life in this film constantly reminds the audience of the fact that the self cannot be detached from the life context and social relationships. For example, the first time Qiu Ju goes to the Chief's house to argue, the Chief's family is dining. In spite of the uneasy relations between Qiu Ju and the Chief, his wife still invites her to join them warmly, as a Chinese family normally does to a neighbor or a friend when they are having a meal. The wife's behavior is a reasonable response to a folk villager. It is based on their past neighborly attachments. This scene displays Zhang Yimou's flair for portraying human feelings. The maintenance of the interaction among these characters contributes to the development of their moral thinking regarding their relationships at issue, and this interaction in turn is made possible by their past attachments to one another. To be sure, attachments based on social roles and social relationships form an integral part of a good life. In this sense the immediate realization of justice is not necessarily and not always more important than the maintenance of attachment.

Has Qiu Ju's awareness of the importance of individual dignity already been "contaminated" by such human feelings? Has her autonomous quest for the realization of justice been spoiled by these attachments, especially by the Chief's actions to save her and her baby, and does it thus turn out to be a disappointing compromise? Some critics lament this shift in the course of the story. Their interpretation of Qiu Ju's psychology is characteristic of modern liberalism and one-dimensional. In this regard, Thomas A. Metzger's critique of Richard W. Wilson's view of Chinese morality is illuminating for the interpretation of Qiu Ju's thoughts and actions. Wilson has devised a list of criteria of moral development in order to appraise Chinese moral behavior. However, Metzger makes a criticism that these criteria are based on dubious individualistic liberalism. Metzger argues:

> If Wilson most fears the dissolution of autonomy, I would instead note his reference to the "ambiguities" of the moral life and suggest that morally responsible, autonomous behavior partly depends on thoughtfulness in identifying and dealing with the ambiguities of defiance and compliance. Thus, pictured as dealing with ambiguities that we in our own culture are often bewildered by, the Chinese strike me as perhaps more successful in dealing with the problem of autonomy than they do Wilson. Above all I would urge that without first dissecting our own feelings about defiance and compliance,

> we are in danger of judging the Chinese in the light of our own insufficiently examined standards of individualistic liberalism.[20]

An indecisiveness about how to settle the matter, I think, has already substituted for Qiu Ju's original strong and autonomous will to seek for a *shuofa*, after the Chief does her the great favor. Her indecisive intentions are developed during their interactions and are oriented toward a good life, which can contribute to the maintenance of the community. Qiu Ju's sense of virtue is displayed in her thoughtful appreciation and handling of the ambiguities of right and wrong, of reason and human feelings, and of justice and forgiveness. That she goes to the Chief's house to express her gratitude in person and invites the Chief to the banquet is a reasonable action in that specific context. These virtues sustain the interaction and attachments in which her family and the Chief's family can seek for the good together in the community in the future. In brief, Qiu Ju shows a self with moral depth; her virtues should not be reduced to foolishness and backwardness. At the end of the story the Chief is taken away by the police. Knowing this, Qiu Ju is so surprised that she runs away from the banquet and follows the siren of the police car. The film ends with the profound picture of Qiu Ju's face full of astonishment. This astonishment does not reflect disappointment that she did not obtain a *shuofa* or even apprehension that the Chief may try to avenge himself upon his return to the village.[21] Instead she is astonished simply because her reconciliation with the Chief has been abruptly destroyed.

The State and Morality

The end of the story suggests that the smooth interaction following Qiu Ju's difficult labor is damaged by an unexpected event. We can imagine that after the Chief is released, it will become far more difficult for Qiu Ju and him to reestablish their relationship. It is mainly due to the intervention of the law, which is a major vehicle of the force of the state, that the interaction is damaged.

[20] Thomas A. Metzger, "Foreword," in Richard W. Wilson, Sidney L. Greenblatt, and Amy Auerbacher Wilson, eds., *Moral Behavior in Chinese Society* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), p. xxii.

[21] See Zhang Jianzhen, "Zhang Yimou yingpian xushi fenxi" [The narrative analysis of Zhang Yimou's films], *Dangdai dianying* (Beijing) 3 (1993), p. 66); Spence, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

While the modern state tends to be anxious not to become involved in moral discussion, it is more engaged than ever before in activities once considered to be the sphere of families and local communities and in the business of regulating moral obligation.[22] Law becomes an important means of this involvement. To be sure, the enactment of universal and impartial law has been thought to be a key indication of the successful modernization of a state. However, the involvement of the modern state in people's moral lives by means of the enforcement of law may harm the capacity of people to recognize their moral problems, to appreciate the nuance of moral positions, and to develop solid moral judgments, because modern law has become the conventional instrument for dealing with conflicts.

The state has never really been distant from people's lives. Qiu Ju's moral experience characterizes the potential transformation of China from totalitarian socialism to "authoritarianism" to "democracy." Totalitarian China under Mao Zedong had long been dominated by his political moralism, which was similar to the moral perspective of Rousseau, who asserted that the state should be "the moralizing agency of human society."[23] To some extent, this is also close to a basic principle of Confucianism: it is the duty of a government to morally educate the people. However, generally speaking, the party-state in post-Mao era has lost the enthusiasm and capacity to moralize the people, while some slogans such as "Learn from Lei Feng" (*Xue Lei Feng*) reappear periodically. During China's political and social transformation the way the state intervenes in society will change. The political reform of China is believed to have to significantly rely on the "rule by law" (*fazhi*) rather than on pure mobilization and political means.[24] The law will become a major means by which the state shapes and reshapes people's moral thinking about self, other, and society, as the film suggests.

At issue is the potential decreasing of the importance of local community to Chinese morality, the adjustment of the role of the state in society, and the Chinese conception of self, other, and society in modernization. While obviously the democratization of China is still

[22] Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper?: Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989) 219.

[23] See Benjamin Schwartz, "The Reign of Virtue: Some Broad Perspective on Leader and Party in the Cultural Revolution" (John Wilson Lewis, ed., *Party Leadership and Revolutionary Power in China* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970]) 160.

[24] See Hintzen, *op.cit.* 50.

modernization. While obviously the democratization of China is still distant, the film raises a question which should not be neglected and which may thought to be a superfluous worry: How does the Chinese quest for the autonomy, equality, and rights of its people lead to the loss of the traditional form of social solidarity which relies greatly on the strength of moral consensus? This moral consensus is in turn based mainly on communal commitments. This destiny becomes a common predicament shared by most modern Western democratic countries. As Wolfe points out:

> Liberal society . . . may be just, but it has no richness of interpretative meaning, no collection of stories, traditions, and practices which, because they are imperfect and ambiguous, allow real human beings to create a morality for themselves out of the textures of their interactions with others.[25]

Thus I ask: "Will there be any *good* life in future China?"

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[25] See Wolfe, *op.cit.*, p. 124.

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